

part of the Cape Fear River flowed along the western shore and around the eastern end of Oak Island. That location, somewhat protected from the winds and tides that came in through the mouth of the Cape Fear, provided for a relatively safe environment for vessels to anchor. Some of the first ships to take advantage of that harbor to make repairs or to ride out a storm were pirate ships that operated along the eastern coast. In the late summer of 1718, Stede Bonnet, known as the Gentleman Pirate, entered the Cape Fear River aboard the sloop *Royal James* along with two captured vessels. While off the coast of North Carolina, the *Royal James* sprang a leak and needed immediate repair. After anchoring within the river, Bonnet and his crew of pirates discovered that the hull of the sloop needed several new planks; so they captured a small vessel that sailed by, put its master and crew ashore, and broke the ship up for its timbers. During the two months that it took for the repairs to be made, word of the presence of the pirates in the Cape Fear River reached the governor of South Carolina. The governor dispatched two ships under the command of Col. William Rhett to the Cape Fear to capture the pirates. A brief battle ensued near the mouth of the river, and Bonnet and his men were taken prisoner. In November 1718 Bonnet and thirty-four of his fellow pirates were tried in Charleston, South Carolina. All were found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. Tradition holds that Bonnet's Creek at present-day Southport was the site of the pirate's battle with William Rhett (Carson 1992:19; Wilmington Star-News, July 4, 1975).

Permanent settlement along the Cape Fear did not take place until after 1723, when George Burrington became governor of North Carolina and began granting individuals tracts of land along the river. On June 3, 1725, Governor Burrington granted to Maurice Moore 1,500 acres of land on the west side of the Cape Fear River. It was on that land that Moore set aside 320 acres for the town of Brunswick. Six years later, in 1731, John Maulsby and John Watson were each granted 640 acres of adjoining property near the confluence of the Cape Fear and Northeast Cape Fear Rivers. It was from this beginning that the town of Wilmington developed (South 1960:1-2; Powell 1968:66-67; Moseley 1733; Sprunt 1992:45-46).

The inhabitants of Brunswick and Wilmington felt vulnerable without an adequate means of defense as hostilities between England and Spain escalated. In response to Spanish attacks along the coast of the North Carolina colony in the 1740s, the colonial legislature empowered Gov. Gabriel Johnston to appoint a council on the defense of the Cape Fear. By 1745 continued fears of Spanish attack along the Cape Fear River prompted the colonial assembly and the governor to authorize a defensive installation to be built near the entrance to the river, where Southport is today. The site, selected by Johnston himself and a group of prominent political leaders and referred to as "Johnston's Fort," was to be large enough for twenty-four cannons and was to be financed by powder money collected at Port Brunswick. Construction did not begin on Fort Johnston until 1748 and continued with several delays and improvements until 1764. The fortification was still under construction and consequently of little use when the Spanish attacked Brunswick Town in 1748. In the year following the attack on Brunswick, the defenders declared that Fort Johnston was finished, although it